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Bedbug Panic May Be More Dangerous Than Bugs Themselves

By Melanie Reynolds

Have you ever fretted about what might happen to you if you dared to rip that tag off your mattress? You know, the one that reads “Do Not Remove Under Penalty of Law?”

Law-abiding citizen that you are, you’ll be relieved to know that the tag’s not meant for you. It’s aimed at mattress and pillow manufacturers. In the early 1900s, state governments passed laws requiring them to put tags on their products in response to concerns that some mattresses and pillows were being made with recycled materials – and that those used materials might harbor bedbugs and other pests.

If just the word bedbug made your skin crawl, you’re not alone. The idea of tiny little insects crawling over us at night and sucking our blood gives many of us the willies. The fact that the nation is seeing an alarming resurgence in bedbug populations – probably due to worldwide travel and pesticide resistance -- only makes the notion worse. Montana and Lewis and Clark County have not been immune.

Like many public health agencies across the country, the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department has experienced a surge in complaints about bedbugs in the past couple of years. That’s why we teamed up with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, the Environmental Protection Agency, and others to bring in a specialist to educate people about the problem.

Earlier this month, close to 80 people crammed into a day-long seminar taught by Dion Lerman, an environmental health programs specialist from Pennsylvania State University. Participants included hotel managers, pest-control professionals, school nurses, day-care providers, home-visiting nurses, and many more. Clearly, there’s broad interest in the subject of bedbugs locally.

Public Health Impacts

Although bedbugs may be creepy, they aren’t known to transmit disease (unlike other critters we’ve discussed in this column; bats, mice, and mosquitoes come to mind). But the Centers for Disease

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Control and Prevention (CDC) still considers bedbugs a serious threat to public health. The critters can cause mental and physical problems, and eliminating them can be very costly.

Among the physical and psychological problems bedbugs can cause are:

- **Bite reactions.** Many people are allergic to the bite and suffer from intense itching. Scratching can cause secondary skin infections and, in diabetics, unhealed ulcers.
- **Psychological reactions.** Some people are so freaked out by the idea of the little parasites that they experience anxiety, depression, and even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to Lerman, studies have shown that people with bedbugs are five times more likely to have serious sleep disturbances. Poor sleep can impact physical and mental health in many unsavory ways.
- **Social reactions.** It's not anybody's fault that they have bedbugs. As Lerman said, it's just bad luck, and it can happen to anyone. But there's still a social stigma attached to them. Shame may stop people whose homes are infested from going out or inviting visitors in. Social isolation can increase stress and depression and discourage older people from seeking home health care when they need it.

'Cure' Is Worse Than Bite

But the biggest public-health concern surrounding bedbugs may be the lengths people go to get rid of them. People can do more damage to their health by misusing pesticides than they would ever suffer from bedbugs, experts say.

Last year, the CDC and the Environmental Protection Agency issued a formal health advisory "alerting the public to an emerging national concern regarding misuse of pesticides to treat infestations of bed bugs and other insects indoors."

The advisory was in response to increasing reports that people were harming their health by using too much pesticide, using outdoor products indoors, using banned pesticides, and not using the products as specified on the label. Other problems arose when people didn't wash or change bedding that had been treated with pesticide or didn't notify people living in the home that pesticides had been applied.

In the worst case on record, a North Carolina couple doused their bed and bedroom with pesticides. The elderly woman, convinced she could still feel bedbugs crawling on her, slept on a sheet soaked in pesticide. She even saturated her hair in pesticide and put a plastic bag over it. Within a few days, she went to the hospital with breathing problems and was put on a ventilator. She died of respiratory failure.

Banishing Bedbugs

There are steps you can take to reduce your chances of bedbug infestation. Most are aimed at nipping their population growth in the bud:

- Check the seams and folds of luggage and clothing for bedbugs when you return from a trip.
- Reduce clutter where bedbugs can hide.
- Avoid buying used mattresses.

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- Thoroughly inspect second-hand clothing and furniture before bringing it into your home.
- Wash bedding thoroughly and regularly and dry on high heat.
- Use bedbug-resistant covers on box springs, mattresses, and pillows.
- Vacuum regularly, preferably with a HEPA vacuum, being sure to get into the cracks and crevices where bedbugs like to hide.

What should you do if you think you have bedbugs? They won't go away without intervention, and the earlier you intervene the better. Lerman offered these suggestions:

- First, make sure they're bedbugs. Some insecticides only work on specific insects. Lerman recommends using sticky tape to "capture" a bug, then tape it to the inside of a self-sealing plastic bag. Do not crush the bug! That makes it all but impossible to identify. Another method is to drop the bug into a small vial of alcohol. Contact the County Extension Service, 447-8350, to arrange for ID by an entomologist, or bug expert.
- Do not use over-the-counter products to try to eliminate the bugs yourself.
- Contact a licensed pest-control expert if your home needs to be treated. The Montana Department of Agriculture can provide a list of those in your area (see link below). Ask your pest-control professional if he or she can use non-chemical ways of eliminating your bedbug infestation.
- If you feel sick after a pesticide application, immediately call your doctor or the National Poison Control Center, 1-800-222-1222.

For more information:

- Pennsylvania State University Extension Program, www.extension.psu.edu/pests/bedbugs
- Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov/bedbugs/
- How to Identify a Bed Bug, www.nyc.gov/html/doh/bedbugs/html/basics/bed-bug-id.shtml
- Licensed Pesticide Applicators, http://services.agr.mt.gov/Pesticide_Applicators/

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